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**SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES IN CONVENTIONAL CONFLICT--PROSPECTS
FOR FUTURE EMPLOYMENT**

by

James M. Hoey III

Lieutenant Commander, United States Navy

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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FOR FUTURE EMPLOYMENT

Special operations as they relate to mid- and high-intensity conflict are examined, especially as related to direct action and special surveillance missions. Military principles of maneuver, surprise, and security are discussed as they relate to utility of special operations forces, followed by a conceptual discussion of SOF organization, capabilities, and employment principles. SOF provide a valuable tool to conventional warfare commanders in mid- and high-intensity conflict. Their employment has not always been as effective as possible, due in large part to ignorance on the part of planners and staffs as to their capabilities and limitations. Closer coordination and enhanced communication between the SOF community and military planners are critical to their proper employment.



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SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES IN CONVENTIONAL CONFLICT--PROSPECTS FOR FUTURE EMPLOYMENT

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Special Operations Forces (SOF) are an enigma to most people, military personnel included. This is due in large part to the nature of the business. Similar in many respects to the operational security concerns of the U. S. Navy submarine service, stealth represents safety to operating forces and is essential to successful mission accomplishment. While contributing to their exceptional ability to succeed where more conventional forces might fail, the paucity of published information concerning SOF capabilities, limitations, and employment principles results in a military that frequently fails to recognize the enormous potential of SOF. Congressionally directed organizational changes and increasing SOF budgetary allocations mandate the military commander understand SOF potentials and limitations in their contribution to joint operations.

This paper explores the purpose of SOF, the principles of warfare associated with their use, current employment concepts, and discusses prospects for future employment. Of the five principal SOF mission areas specified by the Joint Chiefs of Staff -- unconventional warfare, direct action, special reconnaissance, foreign internal defense, and

counterterrorism¹ -- this paper limits itself to direct action and special reconnaissance missions in the mid-intensity and high-intensity conflict environment.* This is not meant to convey that their role in low intensity conflict (LIC) should in any way be diminished, but that their more conventional missions during mid- and high-intensity conflicts play just as an important role if not more so than ever before.

The preponderance of published material concerning SOF capabilities and operations focusses on SOF employment in LIC. Research material on SOF direct action and special reconnaissance is scarce, and the majority of material for this paper comes from sources that focus primarily on LIC related SOF missions or conventional warfare.

*Mid-intensity conflict refers to war between regularly organized military forces. High-intensity conflict refers to war between regular forces plus the use of weapons of mass destruction (nuclear, chemical, biological).

CHAPTER II

SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES

Definitions. Before describing what SOF does, it is prudent to define special operations, direct action, and special reconnaissance:

Special Operations- Actions conducted by specially organized, trained, and equipped military and paramilitary forces to achieve military, political, economic, or psychological objectives by nonconventional military means in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive areas. They are conducted in peace, conflict, and war, independently or in coordination with operations of conventional forces. Politico-military considerations frequently shape special operations, requiring clandestine, covert, or low visibility techniques, and oversight at the national level. Special operations differ from conventional operations in degree of physical and political risk, operational techniques, mode of employment, independence from friendly support, and dependence on detailed operational intelligence and indigenous assets.²

Direct action- Short-duration strikes and other small scale offensive actions principally taken by SOF to seize, destroy, or inflict damage on a specified target; or to destroy, capture, or recover designated personnel or material.³

Special Reconnaissance Operations- Reconnaissance and surveillance operations conducted by special operations forces to obtain or verify, by visual observation or other collection methods, information concerning the capabilities, intentions, and activities of an actual or potential enemy, or to secure data concerning the meteorological, hydrographic, geographic, or demographic characteristics of a particular area. It includes target acquisition, area assessment, and post-strike reconnaissance.⁴

SOF are designed to operate across the entire spectrum of conflict and can provide a tailored response to support any strategic requirement identified by the chain of command. At

the upper end of the conflict spectrum, special operations forces conduct the full range of missions to support, complement and extend conventional military operations. The primary role is to fight as part of the unified commander's deep operations in support of those conventional military operations.⁵ SOF have long fought for legitimacy with senior operational commanders who have not understood this complimentary and supportive relationship. Direct action and special reconnaissance have direct application to conventional warfare.

Direct action missions are conducted primarily in hostile or denied areas beyond the operational capability of conventional maneuver forces. They are normally limited in scope and duration, but may include long-term, stay-behind operations. Direct action operations typically involve the attack of critical targets, interdiction of critical target systems, or the capture, rescue or recovery of selected personnel or sensitive equipment.

Special reconnaissance operations involve the collection and reporting of information using advanced techniques generally beyond the capability of conventional military forces or tactical collection systems, frequently satisfying critical essential elements of information through deep penetration of enemy territory. SOF deploy to specific areas for targeting purposes, using highly sophisticated target designation and communications equipment.

Military Principles. Special operations are not based on sets of exotic operational principles that differ substantially from those of normal combat operations. Where they do differ significantly is that special operations require sustained independent action and operating in circumstances for which regular force personnel are emotionally and mentally unprepared.⁶ It is the mental preparation and specialized skill training primarily that separate SOF from regular conventional forces.

SOF can be the key to military success when properly employed. Proper employment is conditional on a thorough understanding of the military principles involved and the application of SOF to these principles. When the Army's Airland Battle Doctrine was formulated in the early 1980's, it was recognized that attrition warfare--the wearing down of an enemy through application of massive forces and firepower--was no longer an appropriate concept for Western armies. The U. S. Army's Field Operations Manual states:

The object of all operations is to impose our will upon the enemy--to achieve our purposes. To do this we must throw the enemy off balance with a powerful blow from an unexpected direction, follow up rapidly to prevent his recovery and continue operations aggressively to achieve the higher commander's goals. The best results are obtained when powerful blows are struck against critical units or areas whose loss will degrade the coherence of enemy operations in depth, thus most rapidly and economically accomplish the mission. From the enemy's point of view, these operations must be rapid, unpredictable, violent, and disorienting.⁷

Imbedded in this Airland Battle Doctrine and of specific application to direct action and special reconnaissance are the principles of maneuver, surprise, and security.

Maneuver. One of the most vocal advocates of maneuver warfare, the late Brigadier General Richard E. Simpkin, recognized that a goal of battle must be to avoid the potential of attrition warfare and lessen the probability of prolonged military operations. He stated that operative tactics should seek to simultaneously:

- Deny the enemy access to objectives he seeks.
- Prevent enemy forces from loading up the assault force fight with reinforcing echelons.
- Seize the initiative by maneuver to attack and destroy the integrity of the enemy operation scheme, forcing him to break off the attack or risk defeat.⁸

Maneuver theory regards fighting as only one way of applying military force to the attainment of political aims. According to Simpkin, true success lies in pre-emption, or in decision by initial surprise.⁹

The Army Operations Field Manual states:

Offensive campaigns should seek to retain the initiative, to strike enemy weaknesses, to attack the enemy in great depth, and to create fluid conditions which prevent the enemy from organizing a coherent defense. Airborne, air assault, or amphibious operations, deep penetration of armored or mechanized forces, coordinated conventional and unconventional operations...all promote this fluidity.¹⁰

SOF are particularly suited to maneuver warfare through use of airborne and sea-borne insertion/assault for direct strikes against critical rear echelon vulnerabilities and reconnaissance in depth for battlefield preparation. Either by independent direct action or supportive special reconnaissance, SOF provides flexibility necessary for successful maneuver warfare. Of particular value to the

conventional forces commander is the contribution of special reconnaissance. Simpkin goes as far as to say "the primary factor in making maneuver theory work is establishment of a discrete concept of operational intelligence and provision of the means to realize it."¹¹ SOF provides that means.

Surprise. Surprise is the essence of special operations and without it the operations are doomed to failure. Sun Tzu was one of the earliest proponents of special operations and felt strongly that with rational planning and skillful execution, armies could be subdued without resorting to battle. In the forward to The Art of War, Samuel B. Griffith states Sun Tzu believed "that the skillful strategist should be able to subdue the enemy's army without engaging it, to take his cities without laying siege to them, and to overthrow his State without bloodying swords."¹² Sun Tzu also probably provided the earliest recommendation for establishing SOF when he stated:

Later, select crack troops and form them into extraordinary units. Taking advantage of spots where he is unprepared, make repeated sorties and disturb the country south of the river. When he comes to aid the right, attack his left; when he goes to succor the left, attack the right; exhaust him by causing him continually to run about.¹³

Sun Tzu believed that the enemy center of gravity was found in his will and resolve vice on the battlefield. He believed that surprising the enemy with highly maneuverable and especially capable troops, the enemy's will to fight and resolve would be defeated.

SOF are organized, trained, and equipped to allow rapid response to developing situations, high mobility, and flexibility in a variety of mission areas. The enormous range of potential missions adds significantly to a commander's "tool box", a phrase recently coined by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Colin Powell. SOF can be used in direct action roles to cause disruption and dislocation in the enemy's rear or flanks and contribute to the airland battle in depth. From a special reconnaissance perspective, SOF provides the commander with the necessary intelligence and targeting that will contribute to his conventional forces achieving surprise on the battlefield. Specific examples of this would be Army Special Forces or Navy Seals reconnoitering enemy strengths and weaknesses in rear areas or in ports and harbors and using laser designators for initial air strikes with precision guided munitions.

Security. One of SOF's great strengths may also be one of its weaknesses-- security. Security is absolutely essential to allow surprise at the objective and survival of SOF team members. Unlike many conventional military forces, SOF practice exceptional operational security. Survival in enemy territory is predicated on either remaining undetected or achieving local superiority in firepower, followed by prompt extraction. Compromise of plans could result in an enemy prepared to engage and overwhelm the relatively small SOF teams. Loss of SOF during critical stages leading up to

hostilities or after hostilities have begun could in turn lead to loss of surprise and initiative by the conventional warfighting forces and potential loss of the campaign.

This concern for operational security has had a detrimental effect on SOF as a community due to attitudes that have developed within non-SOF military leaders. Little information is available to operational commanders and their staffs concerning SOF capabilities, and in some cases has resulted in open distrust and animosity between these commanders and subordinate special operations forces.

Disclaimers. Before moving on to employment concepts, a brief discussion is warranted about what special operations forces are not. Although there are exceptions, SOF personnel are not "Rambo's". They are not ten feet tall, are not impervious to injury, are insufficient in number to win engagements through overwhelming force, and are well, but not heavily armed. They are not the panacea for all politico-military problems.

SOF are, however, an important adjunct to conventional military forces. Their strength is in their mental toughness, possessing ability to persevere and succeed when others would quit and fail. Their training provides them with unique skills that enable them to perform highly specific, high risk missions deep in enemy territory. They are the elite.

CHAPTER III

EMPLOYMENT

Reorganization. Special Operations Forces, after over a decade of post-Vietnam neglect, are making a comeback. The impetus for the first major event in SOF reorganization found its genesis in the flames of Desert One following the catastrophic attempt to rescue American hostages. The Holloway commission report which detailed the aborted attempt recommended an institutionalized command and control structure for joint contingency operations, with dedicated forces from the different services. This set in motion under the Carter administration organization of a Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), which would serve as a command and control headquarters for high-risk overseas contingency operations, and an administration headquarters for such dedicated strike forces as might be assigned.¹⁴

Under the Reagan administration, additional progress was made. Policy planners were assigned, and the deputy assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs was "double-hatted" as the director for the office of special planning. Given cognizance over SOF revitalization, he was able to accomplish a number of initiatives in spite of recalcitrance by the services and the Joint Staff. Included among these initiatives were the requirement that the services specifically budget for SOF upgrades and equipment

procurement, creation of a flag billet in JCS Special Operations Division, creation of special operations commands (SOC's) within each military theater, and actual increases in Army and Navy SOF personnel.¹⁵

Progress notwithstanding, Department of Defense management were accused by Congress of "foot dragging". Under auspices of the House Armed Services Committee, legislation was drafted designed to give greater power to the JCS chairman and theater commanders. Additionally, and over the objections of the Department of Defense and JCS, legislation was passed in 1986 creating an all-service special operations command at McDill Air Force Base in Florida, an assistant secretary of defense for special operations and low intensity conflict (SO/LIC), and a LIC board at the National Security Council.¹⁶ It is under this framework that SOF are currently organized and under this Congressional oversight and interest that SOF is being revitalized. A number of issues remain to be resolved, and Congressional discontent with DOD implementation of the legislation continues.

Missions and Capabilities. Each service provides personnel and equipment to USCINCSOC, and each service component makes unique contributions to the overall special operations capabilities of the SOC and theater commanders.

The principal army special operations elements are the Special Forces groups (Green Berets) and the Ranger battalions. Special Forces conduct training and assist

friendly resistance forces (such as the Kuwaiti resistance movement), train and assist friendly counterinsurgency forces, conduct basic tactics and weapons training for friendly armies, carry out sabotage operations, conduct recovery missions, and perform special reconnaissance. Rangers, on the other hand, provide a large-scale strike capability, as well as an additional rescue potential. Rangers are organized and trained as elite light infantry battalions. Where they differ from Special Forces is in their readiness, level of training, scale of direct action missions, and Ranger qualification required for all leaders. Special Forces perform self-contained intelligence, sabotage, or raid missions or serve as cadres for training and advising indigenous personnel overseas.

SEALs conduct harbor defense and obstacle reconnaissance, amphibious sabotage, underwater demolitions, and limited scope direct action (raids). They also conduct limited guerrilla warfare operations and provide maritime patrol and commando training in foreign internal defense programs. Most of their missions focus on direct support to naval operations, either amphibious or harbor reconnaissance, and training is thus concentrated predominantly on underwater skills, .

Air force special operations aim mainly at long-range insertion into, and extraction or rescue of personnel from, denied areas. Air force SOF use MC-130 Combat Talons, HH-53 Pave Low, UH-1 and UH-60 aircraft, and Special Operations Low

Level (SOLL) crews flying conventional MAC C-130's.

Additionally, AC-130 Spectre gunships are used for ground support to special operations and support of other joint task force elements in low- to mid-intensity conflict environments. With the exception of SEAL swimmer delivery vehicles and special boats, almost all movement of SOF ground elements are performed by air force SOF.

Performance. Utility of SOF can best be illustrated with some examples from recent operations. It will probably be months, if not years, before events of the war with Iraq are fully known. But from experience in the 1983 Grenada campaign, it might be possible to anticipate some of the direct action and special reconnaissance roles SOF perform in the Iraqi conflict.

Pre-invasion SOF missions included seizure of the Point Salines airfield and elimination of the enemy ground and anti-aircraft threat in the area; rescue of American students at the island's medical school; seizure of Radio Grenada; seizure of the governor general's residence and protection of the governor general until such time as he could be used to regain civilian control of the island. A Ranger battalion, conducting a low altitude parachute insertion, took the airfield and moved on to the main medical school campus to rescue the students. Radio Grenada was eventually taken by the SEALs, as was the governor's residence. SOF performed exceptionally well. But there were miscues and misdirection

as well. One SEAL landing resulted in the drowning of several men, due in large part to lack of recent air-water insertion qualification. When the Rangers liberated one set of students, they discovered there were more elsewhere. Initial attempts to take Radio Grenada met with failure, as did an attempt to liberate political prisoners in Richmond Hill prison. The common thread in these failures were the "can-do" attitude of SOF carried to the extreme in the face of poor intelligence and poor understanding overall of SOF utility in a campaign of this nature by the conventional commanders and planners.¹⁷

The principal utility of SOF in this campaign could have been and should have been the gathering of intelligence through special reconnaissance. Direct action missions met with success primarily through initiative and bold, independent decision making on the ground. Intelligence was not readily obtainable for a variety of reasons. Locations of Cuban and People's Militia troops were uncertain, locations of American students were based on maps and travel brochures, and the forces going up against Radio Grenada and the governor's residence had no idea what resistance they would face. SOF that were at the disposal of the JTF commander could have provided this information in the same manner that British SOF did in the Falklands.¹⁸

After action reports do not provide a convincing argument as to why SOF were not used for this special reconnaissance

mission. Neither the JTF commander, Vice Admiral Metcalf, nor his staff, pressed to use these assets as they were trained and intended, even after recognizing serious shortcomings in the intelligence picture. Admiral Metcalf later reflected:

The intelligence estimates were very optimistic. Intelligence had suggested that the indigenous Grenada force was going to "cut and run" and that the Cubans were a "rag-tag outfit" that really was going to be "a piece of cake." Such a simplistic scenario is one that should automatically raise the skepticism of those in command. . . . We worried and became sensitized to a possible weakness in the intelligence reports.¹⁹

Yet even after this intelligence gap was identified, the use of SOF was never considered. The theater commander, USCINCLANT, had provided for utilization of SOF elements for intelligence gathering in contingency plans for just such an island rescue, but those plans were not used in Grenada.²⁰ This points to a recurring theme when conventional warfare commanders and their staffs are not familiar with the capabilities of SOF.

In the case of Grenada, the JTF commander had to be convinced that the Rangers could jump out of airplanes in the dark.²¹ The problems in Grenada reflect not so much on the SOF as on the military commanders that are expected to use these assets wisely and knowledgeably. Admiral Metcalf best sums this up when he says:

The term "capitalizing on inherent strengths" refers to the way we train. In this operation, there were some notable exceptions to this dictum. But where we deviated from it, we did not do as well. For example, Rangers are trained to operate in the dark, but we inserted them in daylight. Probably, if we had made the assault in the dark, we would have secured the airport and the governor

general's residence, rescued him and avoided the situation we eventually found ourselves in. The lesson here is, use forces as they are trained to fight. Do not try to invent something different for them to do.²²

Current Employment. Based on SOF specialized capabilities and recent employment patterns, appropriate missions for SOF can be projected for mid- and high-intensity conflict. According to Ross S. Kelly:

Many NATO and U.S. European Command planners see dedicated SOF assets as theater-directed collectors of essential information in enemy rear areas, providing human eyes and ears at a time when a conventional onslaught may have greatly impaired allied technical collection capabilities. A secondary mission would be sabotage and selected interdiction.²³

These sentiments are echoed by Rod Paschall when he states:

Battlefield stalemates or even slow-moving fronts provide the opportunity to employ forces within an enemy's vulnerable rear areas, forces that can significantly contribute to a successful outcome by gaining information and inflicting damage on vital installations and the opponent's supply and maintenance lifelines.²⁴

As has already been discussed, SOF do not have the mass or firepower to engage large concentrations of enemy forces. Rather, their compact team size, unique skills, and excellent operational security lend them extremely well to the special reconnaissance mission and direct action raids on a small scale. Based on this, it is anticipated that these are the very mission areas that are assigned to SOF in the Iraqi war.

Deep penetration of Iraq and Kuwait for purposes of intelligence gathering and target designation, port/harbor reconnaissance, raids against Persian Gulf oil platforms, and limited direct action against critical command and control

nodes or lines of communication are all missions of SOF utility. The surveillance portion of these missions has a primary goal of providing a steady stream of accurate ground-observed information (i.e. bomb damage assessments) on enemy capabilities, dispositions, and movements. The direct actions would focus on systematic destruction of some segment of the enemy's force structure, some category of his material needs, or targets not appropriate for air strike. Although not within the scope of this paper, training of Kuwaiti and Saudi military forces, rescue of downed airmen, and counter- and anti-terrorism are undoubtedly assigned missions.

Prospects for the Future. Little change to SOF missions and capabilities are envisioned for the foreseeable future. In spite of Congressional oversight and the current emphasis on SO/LIC, little is expected to change in the way mid- and high-intensity conflicts are waged. Of obvious benefit from the additional resources allocated SOF for LIC is the continuing capability of SOF to conduct direct action and special reconnaissance in all levels of conflict. With the cold war apparently coming to a successful conclusion and with the propensity of the military to train for the last war, Iraq may prove a watershed event for the future of U.S. military forces in general. It is believed that SOF will prove an integral part of the war effort. And as a result, the utility of SOF in conventional conflicts will hopefully become evident to all military planners and staffs.

SOF if anything will become more important in conventional conflict. Doctrine, education, and "lessons learned" are worthless unless military commanders incorporate SOF employment concepts into their overall battle plans. Combining principles of maneuver and surprise with initiative and economy of force allows the commander to complement his conventional forces with the unique capabilities of SOF. The U.S. Special Operations Command and theater SOC's appear to be the key players in this process.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has addressed the purpose of special operations forces, associated military principles of warfare, current employment doctrine, and prospects for the future. It is evident from even a cursory glance at the literature on SOF that the United States has a tremendous tool at its disposal in the military "tool box". The problem is not one of manning and equipping the SOF as much as it is in the clever and proper use of these forces. Operational security has worked against SOF in as many ways as it has protected it, particularly as concerns the body of knowledge available to military planners and staffs.

The chief of doctrine development at the Army Special Warfare Center and School stated part of the problem very succinctly when he said:

USSOCOM and the SOCs must ask the important questions if they are to begin integrating Special Forces operations into theater campaign plans. They must understand the unified commander's intent -- what his strategic aims are and how he intends to deploy, employ and sustain his military power in order to attain those aims across the conflict spectrum.²⁵

Although specifically addressing Army Special Forces, his remarks apply equally well to the entire SOF community. Only when the theater commander's aims, intent and concept of operational employment are articulated can SOF begin to

develop plans and targeting to determine how best to support the commander. At the same time, it is critical that the theater commander have a solid foundation in SOF capabilities and limitations in order to make informed and wise decisions on asset employment and integration with conventional military forces.

Awareness of SOF should not be limited to just the theater level. AS SOF assumes greater capability as a result of Congressionally mandated revitalization, their potential for contributing to the military solution at all levels of conflict assumes a greater importance. It is not enough that the theater level planners be "SOF smart". Planners at all levels should be educated from early in their career for an appreciation of SOF capabilities and limitations. This will preclude future JTF commanders from asking whether Rangers can jump from planes at night and whether one SOF element is just like another.

SOF impact on the overall war effort can be substantial. They are highly trained for very specific missions and are the most proficient forces the United States possesses. They are not the answer to all problems, but should be considered a valuable supplement to the main issue. Only through informed, judicious utilization by military commanders can SOF make their greatest contribution.

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16. Ibid., p. 4.
17. Ibid., p. 14.
18. Martin Middlebrook, Task Force: The Falklands War, 1982 (New York: Penguin Group, 1987), p. 99.

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20. Kelly, p. 15.

21. Metcalf, p. 283.

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24. Rod Paschall, LIC 2010: Special Operations and Unconventional Warfare in the Next Century (McLean: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1990), p. 87.

25. Harned, pp. 8-9.

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